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## Predicting Failure

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## Predicting Failure

by Matt Naglewski

(History 112)

The Assignment: Book Review: Review the book We by Eugeny Zamyatin. Place the book in proper historical context. Pay special attention to the roles of ideology, individuality of ideal societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

A man's relation to the society as a whole, and particularly his duties to and freedom's within it, has long been a fundamental point of deliberation for theorists, but especially so in the time since the Enlightenment. What does it mean to be free? Which aspects of life are the responsibility of the citizens and which belong to the state? Is happiness for all an attainable goal? Questions of society probably never will uniform answers throughout the world, as nations can be so diverse that the practical application of a given theory in different places may yield different results. In We, Yevgeny Zamyatin took an intriguing yet ruthlessly intricate look at a futuristic society dominated by extreme Socialist ideology. But through this cryptic story what was Zamyatin's message? What was it that caused this book to be kept out of publication in Russia for 68 years? To illustrate the paradoxically chaotic workings of a state founded on a basis of logic was probably not Zamyatin's intent. For purposes of getting at the heart of the story, let us analyze his treatment of individuality, ideal societies, and ideology.

The first area of discussion is individuality. OneState was virtually devoid of it. The citizens, or numbers as they were referred to in OneState, did not have personal mothers and fathers, had standardized uniforms, and even had compulsory hairstyling in the form of shaved heads. No individuality or dissent was tolerated. Loss of individuality was the cost of efficiency. Should a number fail to conform to the established logical law, it was the duty of the other numbers to report him. All this was done for the sake of happiness, but it could be the case that people appreciate happiness more when they discover it themselves rather than being told what it is. The narrator of the story, D-503, explained the nearly non-existent view of individual rights in a rhetorical bit of wisdom comparing the individual and the state to a gram and a ton, respectively. The obvious action, he claimed, was for the number to, "Forget that you're a gram and feel yourself a millionth part of a ton" (111). Grasping a possible meaning from this proverb of quasi-Communist sentiment becomes possible when it is shown in its historical context.

During the recently concluded First World War, millions of individuals lost their lives in the name of the states. Zamyatin may have been feeding off of people's losses of family and friends. OneState's domination over the numbers casts light on a view of the irrelevance of individuals in relation to the state. In addition to its unprecedented casualty rate, World War I also marked the advent of horrific means of destruction of humans like tanks and mines, etc. Many in the world may have seen these inventions as prime examples of efficiency displacing humanity. This hopeless scenario for individuals in post-revolution OneState may have been a suggestion of the future for Russians in the wake of their revolutions. All of this could have appeared to be counter to the interests of the fledgling Communist regime and thusly contributed to the suppression of the book in Russia.

The second topic is the conception of ideal societies. OneState's social structure was purported to be the apex of civilization. Through adherence to principles of logic and efficiency and elimination of personal sentiments, OneState contrived a society seen as ideal. The problem with this was who is to say what an "ideal" society is? As was stated earlier, defining the relationship between citizen and state is a primary task of a society. OneState put almost all the emphasis on the state to the exclusion of interests of the numbers, in the name of happiness. Human life was totally devalued, as was evident when ten members of the crew of the INTEGRAL died in an accident and no one even stopped working. The gram-ton analogy thus seemed contradicted, for the numbers were not part of a whole, they were in fact nothing. This could be seen as a critique of the Communist system. The labor of individuals was utilized for the advancement of the state while they themselves were given no recognition or concern. To the citizens of a country like Russia whose leaders preached the merit of a collective state, prospects of treatment like this could have been very upsetting. Zamyatin's allegory may have disturbed many if his words had reached Russians since his portrayal of what contemporary society could become was so grim. People in Russia may have questioned their society intensely due to this warning, which naturally would lead to questioning of the foundation of any system, its ideology.

Ideology was a very important theme in *We*. Multiple ideologies were at work during Zamyatin's time, and likewise were represented in his book. The first ideology critiqued was Communism. Although the ubiquitous reach of OneState was more reminiscent of totalitarianism, the fashioning of all the numbers into a single collective whole had a distinct Communist quality. But the society that was depicted in the story showed little to no appeal for citizens. In OneState, the numbers were not parts of a whole, feeding off of each other to derive strength. Instead, they were alienated from each other and the state. Alienation from the state was evident in the total control exercised over the numbers, and alienation from each other was made clear by the lack of care shown by the crewmembers of the INTEGRAL that ten co-workers had just perished. As we saw how coldly people were treated when Communism ran amok in OneState, the idea here might be that ideologies need to focus more on people and less on abstract concepts of regulating them. This maltreatment was echoed in Russia in the years following the writing of *We*.

From the idea of regulating people, another ideology appears as one Zamyatin took aim at. Frederick Taylor's study of scientific management pervaded English society where the author spent much time. It also made the capitalist workplace comparable to OneState in its all-controlling nature and atmosphere that diminished the importance of people. Taylor's work belittled people as interchangeable. *We* questioned the application of scientific constants to societal variables by taking it to extreme lengths to highlight its shortcomings. One could see this as a challenge to the entirety of the newly emerging social sciences. Similar to Communism, Zamyatin's view on industrial capitalism paints a picture of forlorn citizens dominated by leadership. It is intriguing to wonder what he would posit as a solution to the social ideological void he advanced.

The third ideology that influenced Zamyatin was Romanticism. As an ideology that opposed the rationalism prevalent in the Enlightenment, Romanticism did not have to look far for material discrediting human reason. World War I devastated people and states alike without much good reason. The stripping of the number's individual emotions possibly alluded to the stripping of any remnants of human innocence by the First World War. The role of Romanticism takes a subordinate role in the present inquiry, being as it was more an artistic than a political

philosophy.

After reviewing the roles of individuality, conceptually ideal societies, and ideology, We takes on a much deeper and clearer story than was directly apparent. Zamyatin meant to suggest the perils of Communism while pessimistically asserting the futility of human rebellion.

Although Communism had yet to reach its worst stages in Russia, a distrust of any government there could be seen as well founded when one considers the barrage of setbacks that hindered Russia in the several years prior to the writing of We, from the War to famines to internal revolutions. As problems like these were dealt with around the world, some ought to apply science to the problems in hopes of crafting solutions. In some cases, as Zamyatin might attest, the expediency of the efficiency that came from the social sciences could be a mask for, or even the cause of, the complete devaluation of humanity. By decoding the analogy between OneState and the real world, and recognizing the course of history pursuant to the story, one can observe the validity of Zamyatin's pessimistic view. So depending on one's point of view, the 68-year suppression of We could have its merits.

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#### Works Cited

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